

You might think it would be great fun for me to be able to stand up here and tell you all how I think you should vote on Tuesday. I do too, sort of—wow, if I could get all of you to vote the way I think you should—until I remember I didn't answer the Holy Spirit's call to be an editorial writer or a candidate for political office. Once I pray and take seriously what I'm here for—to proclaim as best I can what it is God expects me to preach—it's a different proposition. A humbling one.

The late Atlanta Pastor Frank Harrington—a very prominent man of God—told of his own private struggles when two of the deacons in his first church were facing off against each other to become mayor of Hinesville. Supporters of each began sitting on opposite sides of the sanctuary; as the race shaped up to be a close one the Postmistress of the town intimated that as pastor he could tip the election with even the slightest “tilt” in his attitude or speech. Of course he couldn't do that, he said. He told her instead that he was praying for the election. She pressed him: “Exactly how are you praying?” “I'm thanking God for a secret ballot!”

I'm also thanking God for the long tradition of pastors in this land who have kept faith with their charge from God—going all the way back to the earliest New England Puritans (some of our Congregational ancestors) and the tradition of the “Election Sermon,” first preached in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1634 and then repeated all over New England. Christ's Church was a vital—probably the most vital—force in encouraging independence from England. Those early pastors recognized that for disciples of Christ every sphere of our life is lived in subjection to His Spirit; no element of our life is an “add-on” beyond the scope of our faith.

Election Day was the most important day in the life of the community, except for Sunday. The people and the leaders gathered expectantly to hear...not the politicians or candidates-elect making speeches—instead they all listened to the Puritan preachers.

(Until 1775, and even following, the Election Sermon was preached each May when the civil government convened—and not only to the people but to the officials: the Governor, the Deputy-Governor, the magistrates and deputies all ruling the Colonists under the British Crown. This sermon typically touched upon the nature of government, upon our human nature (not sparing our tendency toward sin), the qualifications and duties of godly rulers, and the need for widespread and personal repentance and reformation.

Of course these themes were familiar to New Englanders before the Revolutionary War. Not formally educated, they nonetheless listened to two sermons every week, typically between one and two hours long, delivered by the most educated and well-read person in the town, their entire life. This would translate into roughly 7000 sermons heard, or 15,000 hours of preaching. (With no TV, no radio, no DVDs to compete.) This number of hours would be the equivalent of about ten separate undergraduate degrees! Some of it had to sink in: no wonder those Colonists developed the moxie to risk their lives, their fortunes, their sacred honor to fight for their independence: the Church was probably the most vital force encouraging that fight.)

Preachers back then did not preach on politics every Sunday; their restraint garnered for them the respect of the civil authorities; often their pulpit suggestions were enacted into law. (They also led their churches and the willing in public in regular days of

“fasting and humiliation” before God, calling both church members as well as the civic authorities to righteousness in public life, acknowledging before all citizens that their blessings and freedoms depended upon the favor of God from whom comes every good gift.) This custom demonstrated the reality to which fourth President John Quincy Adams alluded: “The highest glory of the American Revolution was this: it connected, in one indissoluble bond, the principles of civil government with the principles of Christianity.” [John Wingate Thornton, *The Pulpit of the American Revolution*, Gould and Lincoln, Boston, 1860].

In this company, I accept the responsibility with humility. (I cannot preach an Election Sermon because I cannot preach to those leaders who are not here: it’s just us this morning.) First of all, I admit before all of you it’s very hard to try to subordinate my own political beliefs to those of Jesus. This is almost impossible, and not just for me: it’s almost impossible to yield our own core convictions to those of our Lord, rather than to pick and choose and refine and buttress our beliefs, and then afterward look for His approval. The Christian Left does this, the Christian Right does this; (only the secularists do not, for one obvious reason!) I do this and I suspect most of you do this. We all have our life experiences; we have our place in society; we hold dear to our cherished political tenets.

In this day and age in the U.S., sad to say, if we’re at all paying attention, we accurately discern that an issue such as Proposition 8 (The “Definition of Marriage” Initiative) isn’t simply a referendum, but instead a lightning rod which summarizes and reflects two complete and coherent, but totally opposed views of the world. Two different views of reality, of the common good; two different and competing views of theology and ideology and “rights” and well-being between which it’s hard work to find any middle ground. It’s not easy for any of us to say, “Thy will be done” when it comes to voting on such “hot-button” issues.

(This is important to understand: partisans on each side of the political divide are not simply disagreeing on a ballot initiative or on the Presidential election: they are likely to view the world entirely differently and therefore may have no possible middle ground to share. Their basic premises may be so opposed that they may have, literally, nothing to discuss with those who see things differently. All the more important for those of us claiming to represent Jesus to know our convictions and to treat others with whom we disagree with full civility and respect.)

Each of us has the opportunity in our daily words and deeds, and also in our voting, to affirm with Dutch theologian and former Prime Minister Abraham Kuyper (there’s a combination, unfortunately, we don’t see much of these days) who declared, “There is not one inch of creation about which Jesus Christ does not say, ‘This is Mine!’”

Our lesson this morning has something to say about the relationship between the Christian and the State. Paul posits that the authority of all governments comes from God who alone is sovereign. Disciples of Christ are to respect this authority at all times, and pay our fair share of taxes [vv 2, 6] as Jesus told His people to pay their taxes unto Caesar. Paul is surely not saying every government is equally pleasing to God, or deserving of our allegiance. This would be absurd. Insofar as civic governments behave as “God’s servant for your good,” “executing wrath on the wrongdoer” then they command our respect as a government “to whom respect is due.”

That is, we are to live not as anarchists but as respectful citizens at all times. We are free (and expected) to challenge governments which fail to live up to their God-given responsibilities—“but also because of conscience”—particularly in the 21st Century now that we enjoy the privilege of living in a participatory democracy. (This privilege is still unknown to billions of persons—many of whom have literally died for the chance to enjoy it, is the particular result of the labors of generations of brave disciples of Christ. You have no doubt noticed democracies have flourished where the gospel has gone before, and have trouble taking root elsewhere.)

“Owe no one anything,” Paul urges. Presumably this would principle would apply to Government. It is shocking and sad to me that we have approved and voted for politicians who incur Federal deficits aggregating to such mind-boggling quantities—and even before the recent and/or coming trillion dollar bailouts, more or less. If we divide the Government’s obligations by the number of our citizens, then every American, including the baby born at Hoag Hospital this morning, is now facing a \$200,000 deficit of unfunded liability, according to one widespread estimate. (I read that our personal debt, as opposed to is now equal to the annual entire GDP of the nation—when even one generation ago we were a nation of savers.) If we individually choose to spend now, pay later, it’s easy to see how we have voted for a Federal and state Government which have elected to spend now, and have someone else pay later. And these budgetary excesses have not come in the middle of time of great Depression such as the early 30’s or an all-consuming war such as the early 40’s. They have been amassed in our most prosperous times: what shall happen when the whole economic cycle goes sharply negative, as cycles eventually do? And what exactly has all this State borrowing and spending bought us? (French historian and popular observer of the American people Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) foresaw with frightening accuracy: “The American Republic will endure until the day Congress discovers that it can bribe the public with the public’s money.” He also observed with approbation, “America is great because she is good.”)

I trust all of us would like would to solve one of the problems of human nature which bedevils any democracy. Politicians are always needing to get re-elected; for Congressional representatives there is always less than two years ‘til the next election. I don’t suppose anyone is proud of the \$14 billion in earmarks spent to keep local electorates happy, and incumbents in their favor, this past year. (Both sides talk of campaign reform for politicians: the only problem is that politicians on both sides need to approve them. For some reason the Press has been asleep on this one this year: I’ve heard no reference this time to the vast amounts of money, or inequality in amount, being spent for the Presidential Race. In years past these funds had been criticized as a sinister “War Chest” of financing.)

[If you’re interested in some of my observations characterizing Liberals and Conservatives, there’s an appendix to the printed sermons on the information table, or you could always email me. No time or need to try to explain all that now.]

DeTocqueville had his pithy remarks. But we have the gospels. We have the New Testament, and the Bible. We have the Holy Spirit of the living God. What has Jesus to say? How would He counsel that we vote this time around?

Each of you has between now and Tuesday to decide that for yourself. (You know where to find the four gospels; you’ll find His Sermon on the Mount—counsel not

designed to run a Government or a manifesto of universal ethics but written to govern the behavior of His disciples—in Matthew, chapters 5-7.)

He spent most of His attention focused not on Rome, not on Jerusalem, not on the legislative process, not on the Kingdom of this World but on the Kingdom of God. Changing hearts and transforming character, not changing the composition of the Roman Senate.

Let's take a step back and imagine. What if the American public voted on every single issue exactly as God would have us do. (Still 78.4% of the US population identify themselves as "Christian," while 4% identify themselves as "atheist" or agnostic" according to the Feb., 2008 Pew Foundation survey). No matter our religious persuasions: what if next Tuesday we got the right President. We got every senator, every representative right. Every state governor, every state and local official, every mayor right. We saw thru every crook and rewarded those on heaven's own side. Imagine if we Californians got every proposition right (if even Jesus Himself could figure out the doubletalk and accusations and counter-accusations in the official voter guides, and figure out what some of them are really trying to accomplish, and whether they'd actually gain or lose the taxpayers billions of dollars.)

Would greed disappear? Our need to borrow and spend our way to abundance and fulfillment? Would we stop deficit spending, earmarks, irresponsible pollution? Would our foolish pride be legislated away? Would our marriages, or primary relationships, become more loving and more satisfying? Would peace in the Middle East come sooner, or a cessation in terrorist designs of violence against the West? Would pastors preach fascinating, upbeat 12-minute sermons? Would we be able to control our propensity toward fear or anger or unforgiveness? When we come right down to it, what exactly could Washington or Sacramento or the local School Board do to help you or me grow into the person God created us to be?

No System has the capacity to change the human heart. With unchanged human hearts even good legislation will lead to unintended harmful consequences. With different human hearts and attitudes not so long ago, virtually every man on the American frontier owned a gun and murder by gunfire was far more rare than today; many persons in the middle of New York City never locked their doors even during the shortages of the Great Depression; bankers in thousands of towns across the land for over a century conducted their business with farmers on a handshake—without benefit of written contract or lawyer. (I would be glad if you wanted to ask me why I know these things are true.) People helped one another in time of need. People, to a larger degree, chose to be their sister's, their brother's, keepers.

This is no excuse for us not to be engaged in the public arena, speaking our voice as we understand the Holy Spirit to be directing us. I love it that some of you are so passionate about your political involvement, and not all on the same side. (Some of you from both the Left and the Right forward me political emails—it is indeed a vast political gulf out there; a miracle of God we all worship and study and pray and live together in harmony!)

The mission of Jesus is a reminder that His Church is not to be one more special interest group lobbying for this privilege or that perk. (I confess I may be guilty. It bothers me that the Church keeps losing ground to the judges and the culture (e.g. Massachussetts Roman Catholic Charities; churches seized by eminent domain rulings,

home schooling Christian parents forcibly seized and jailed (Germany, 2007), pastors imprisoned for “hate speech” as they preach what they have long preached and what they understand the Scriptures clearly to teach, (Sweden, Canada, 2006) etc. I like the tax-exempt status long enjoyed by religions and non-profits because it enables us to spend more of our resources doing what we are meant to be doing. Until very recently the public clearly recognized the church has been doing what now is often called the Government’s work: mental health, crime prevention, drug prevention and rehabilitation, etc, etc,—and for free.)

Jesus, however, is committed to a new Administration of a different order. To deep Change, personal Change and therefore social Change, lasting Change, eternal Change.

We, His disciples, are not to get bogged down in partisan politics, turning away and shutting out people who very much need Jesus and His Church. (Many people still refer derisively to the prominent preachers’ assertion that Hurricane Katrina was God’s wrath on New Orleans for their homosexuality and general “unrighteousness”—somehow that preacher just knew it couldn’t have been retribution for greed, consumerism, racism, religious self-righteousness—even if he had been right that it was God doing the smiting as “payback time”—in which case I suspect we’d all have been in big trouble long ago—not just in New Orleans. But we all need Jesus—even those doing the deriding, who are only now more sure His ambassadors and His cause are ridiculous or hateful than they were before.)

Who else will be in a position to invite anyone closer to the Kingdom of God, into personal relationship with Jesus, without mud on our face and wounds from the political infighting of this world—that is, to say with any credibility whatsoever? Who else will have authority to proclaim, “The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Good News.” [Mk 1:14] “Jesus the Christ, God’s Messiah of the world, has come among us.”

If we remember anything of our Church history, we acknowledge the finest and strongest centuries in the life of the Church were those first centuries after Jesus when those tiny bands of Christ’s followers dared to proclaim that Jesus, not Caesar, was Lord and Savior of the world; that the City of God, not the city on the Tiber, was eternally and ultimately glorious. Everyone knew which horse to bet on: the Empire at 65 million strong vs. the Christians, who had a few thousand nobodies on their side who dared to think Jesus transcended the pronouncements of Nero or Caligula or whomever. The Jesus people dared to think there was a God watching over and somehow managing the affairs of human beings, whose Kingdom has no end and whose compassion and justice and power know no budget cuts, no fleeting political bedfellows, no voter registration fraud.

Political campaigns, if they are idealistic enough or clever enough, will position their candidates to tap into and promise to meet our deep human longings for fairness, for justice, for belonging, for community, for security, for meaningful work, for dignity. No political victor, no system of government, no earthly Administration can accomplish these things.

Some can come closer than other, which may be why the watchword for this election has been “Change.” So many Americans feel cynical toward Washington;

cynical toward businesses and banks, cynical toward churches, cynical toward pastors, cynical toward public officials—cynical all around. Many are daring to hope for substantive change. (It looks like we're about to get it, all right.) We every one of us longs for Real Change. Every one of us in this world longs for Real Change—more than we know.

We Christians hold dearly but only provisionally to our citizenship in this world. We remember there is One who delivers on His promises. We know there is One who brings the Change we want and need: deep change, lasting change, eternal change. There is One who manages the future in which every one may have enough, and in our liberty and dignity, conferred by God, we may be truly and eternally equal.

Our longing is for the Rabbi. The One chosen by God to run for Messiah. The One who lost in a landslide and got crucified.

Romans 13:1-8

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.

Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them--taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. Owe no one anything, except to love one another.